Teaching vocabulary through code-mixing

Mehmet Celik

Direct vocabulary teaching is a common component of speaking classes. Free from the formality, the direct attention, and the extra work of this traditional approach, a phenomenon called ‘code-mixing’ may be a useful technique to introduce target vocabulary items. Code-mixing involves the use of an L1 word in an L2 utterance—a common occurrence in bilingual or immigrant communities. This study involved code-mixing, a little-known technique used in teaching vocabulary. It was found that using code-mixing to introduce new vocabulary can be an efficient and effective method. This article discusses the procedures and cognitive processes involved in vocabulary learning, and explains the use of code-mixing to introduce vocabulary. Finally, the principles, benefits, and drawbacks of this technique are discussed, based on the study results.

Introduction

Code-mixing is a widespread phenomenon in bilingual communities where speakers use their native tongue (L1) and their second language (L2) in certain different domains. However, it is not always the case where each distinct language is exclusively used in one particular domain. Instead, what tends to happen is that a mixture of the two languages is in question. The mixture usually involves one word (or phrase) from one language in the syntax of another, with the majority of words coming from the latter language. The following examples from my personal observation illustrate the concept of code-mixing with Turkish and English (translations mine).

1 Seni büyük boss istiyor dediler. (They said the big boss wanted you.)
2 ... bana trouble vermek için. Ben ağlayınca o da fun yapacak. (... to give me trouble. When I cry, then he will have fun.)
3 A Mum. Your friend Alev geldi. (Your friend Alev came.) B All right. Buyursun. Kitchen’dayım. (Let her in. I’m in the kitchen.)
4 I am masum. (I am innocent.)

Code-mixing can be defined as a phenomenon in which a word or an expression from one language is used in a group of words whose structure belongs to another distinct language (Wardhaugh 1990: 104). If, however, complete sentences from both languages follow each other, the phenomenon in question is called ‘code-switching’, as is the case in the above dialogue (Example 3).
In my English as a foreign language (EFL) speaking classes, there have been times when I have had to resort to code-mixing to introduce the vocabulary items I was to use, and I thought that my students would not know in my ‘warmers’ (i.e. ice breakers) and storytelling sessions. I thought it was necessary to carry out these sessions because the English words I had originally planned to use might have impeded their progress in writing. So in order to have a smooth exchange of ideas, I inserted single Turkish words into English statements.

This study explores how code-mixing can be applied to vocabulary teaching in EFL/ESL classes. The participants, a total of 19 Turkish first-year university EFL teacher trainees (15 female, 4 male), were at intermediate and upper-intermediate levels in one class. Based on the results of the experiment, the implications of code-mixing in relation to vocabulary teaching are explored, followed by a discussion of the principles and drawbacks of this technique.

In second and foreign language teaching, strong proponents of the communicative approach have typically frowned upon the use of L1 in L2 classes. However, there are others, mainly practitioners, who advocate careful and limited use of L1. This section offers a brief overview of the studies that support principled use of L1 in L2 classes.

Schmitt and McCarthy (1997: 2) note that ‘... a learner’s L1 is one of the most important factors in learning L2 vocabulary’. Further, it is a widespread observation that even ‘ideal’ bilingual speakers sometimes have to draw on vocabulary from one language while speaking another. This may be taken to indicate that vocabulary, in addition to other linguistic components in both languages, is organized in the way synonyms and antonyms are organized in one’s L1. For instance, Channell (1988: 93) states that ‘L1 and L2 lexicons within the same speaker are clearly linked, phonologically, semantically, and associationally. Speakers can make conscious links between them.’

One of the few examples of the use of L1 in L2 teaching is found in de Majia’s (1988) study of code-switching. Recall that code-switching involves the use of entire sentences (or greater text length) of one’s L1 while speaking or writing in one’s L2. In this study, the teacher told a story first in the participants’ L1 (Spanish), and then repeated it in English. De Majia reports satisfactory results in students’ L2 output, which bodes well for further varied use of L1 in L2 learning.

Other supporters of L1 use in L2 teaching include Atkinson (1993), Auerbach (1993), Cole (1998), and Weschler (1997). Cole (1998: 2) argues for selective, principled use of the L1 due to its practicality and efficiency, stating that ‘The struggle to avoid L1 at all costs can lead to bizarre behaviour: One can end up being a contortionist trying to explain the meaning of a language item, where a simple translation would save time and anguish … if students understand the concept of a noun, it is much simpler to translate the word “noun” than to describe it in L2.’ Emphasizing affective, psychological benefits for L1 use, Atkinson (1993: 13) states that ‘For many learners, occasional use of the L1 gives them the opportunity to show that they are intelligent, sophisticated people.’
Given that code-mixing is utilized by bilinguals, and that the use of L1 is justified to a certain extent (appropriateness, practicality, efficiency, affect, etc.) in the teaching of L2, the rationale to use code-mixing in speaking classes is well-supported. Importantly, as code-mixing involves the use of only one lexical item from L1 in an L2 statement, the use of the mother tongue is not unchecked.

How new vocabulary is learnt

The introduction of new vocabulary can be carried out through the use of realia, pictures, mimicry, contrast, enumeration, explanation, translation, and so on. Translation is less widely used, although its efficacy has been acknowledged by, among others, Harmer (1991) and Ur (1996). Harmer (1991: 161–2) notes that the use of translation can be an easy and quick way of presenting vocabulary, but warns that it may discourage students from interacting with words. The feedback I have received from my students has indicated that this is not the case.

Following the introduction of new vocabulary, what kind of pedagogic and mental processes occur in the mind of the learner? A connectionist model is a useful explanation of how linguistic information is encoded (McClelland et al. 1986). In this model, learning takes place through the strengthening and weakening of interconnections between and among related meanings, rules, etc., in response to examples encountered in the input. Adopting this model, one would expect that the learner would establish a meaning connection through the use of a native vocabulary item couched in a string of English words. Although, in the short term, the learner may equate the meanings of the two words, finer distinctions of meaning, appropriateness, usage, etc., are likely to develop as the learner is exposed to more input in the later stages of learning.

Schmidt (1990) claims that for a conscious learning to take place, an L2 learner, among other things, has to:

a. be aware of learning something,

b. notice the rule, word, etc., to be learnt,

c. have an understanding,

d. have the ability to articulate, use the learnt word, rule, etc., and

e. have the learnt item in the short-term memory.

How can this be achieved in a speaking class? One of the several different ways of introducing the topic is simply to present it orally, encouraging the students to think deeply about it. In a storytelling context, this type of presentation is expected to generate and make connections among ideas, in addition to vocabulary and grammatical structures associated with those ideas. In line with this practice, the teacher introduces the story or topic, and elaborates on it by inserting the new (i.e. target) vocabulary in L1.

Method

Listening task

The first stage of the study involved input. That is, I told the students a story, inserting carefully chosen vocabulary items from their L1, as illustrated below.
OK, you know, every day so many people are killed on the roads. There are many reasons for this, of course. One of the reasons may be that the laws are very gevşek. Yes, that’s right. We know that laws are really lax. This laxity is hard to overcome for many reasons. So, this situation is a problem for yetkililer too. What can they do? I mean the authorities. Not much really. Because the authorities can only bring solutions using mevcut laws. But you see the existing laws are very lax. More effective laws should be introduced to replace the existing laws. However, there is another problem. It is to do with police officers. You see, they are misamahakar towards drivers. They tend to let them go when they break a traffic rule. So, we can easily say that police officers are lenient towards drivers. I strongly believe that a lenient attitude, or leniency, is the root of so many other problems in this society. Also, there is no denetleme on police officers. No inspection, no result. I mean, inspection is very necessary for the overall traffic. Another thing is that police officers are not willing to report the problems to their amirs. We don’t know why, but they don’t tell their superiors about the physical problems on the roads. Maybe they are afraid of their superiors. I mean, what if their superiors come and inspect what they do, how they do it? Then, we can say that lenient police officers should be inspected by their superiors for the safety of people although the existing laws are lax.

Oral task

Students were asked to form pairs to discuss causes of traffic accidents, with no instructions to use the newly introduced vocabulary. As the participants started to discuss the topic, I circulated to monitor the conversations. I observed that most of the students used many of the target lexical items.

Writing task

As Harmer (1991: 160) suggests, for better internalization of vocabulary, I had the students interact not only orally but also in writing. I also had the students write down what they had discussed. See Appendix A for selected extracts from the writings of the 19 students. The extracts illustrate target lexis and/or related words (underlined).

Data analysis and results

One of the most striking features of the participants’ written output is that they never used L1 lexis (represented in the column L1 uses) despite the fact that they faced difficulties with spelling, syntax, and usage. As many as six students hardly touched upon the points raised in the listening, which involved the use of new vocabulary. When they did, however, they tended to paraphrase the concepts rather than come up with near-synonyms. Recall that participants were not instructed to use the new vocabulary. For further details, see Appendix B, Target lexis tables, which classify participant usages for each target lexical item in terms of misuses, L1 uses, related uses, and right uses.

We begin with the word ‘lax’, which was used both in its adjective and noun form—‘laxity’— by the teacher. This word, and its derivation, were used a total of 20 times, which is very satisfactory. There were three misuses of the word: 1) ‘lexity’ was misspelt, although the usage is acceptable, 2) ‘lexical’ was used as an adjective, and 3) ‘lexiace’ was used...
as a noun. Interestingly, the suffix ‘−iance’ was used to form nouns, which indicates that the student was using her morphological resources to produce the noun form. Related uses were abundant. Some of the expressions used to paraphrase ‘lax’ included ‘loose’, ‘must be stricter’, ‘not sufficient’, ‘not straight enough’, and ‘not strict enough’.

The word ‘authorities’ was not used as frequently as ‘lax’: 9 times overall. Two misspellings were ‘autories’ and ‘otorities’. One related use was ‘institutions’.

As for the word ‘existing’, there were a total of 9 usages. Although syntactically acceptable, there were two misspellings: ‘exciting’ and ‘existant’. Consider this excerpt: ‘… the exciting rules, that is; the rules we have are not sufficient.’ The student here was attempting to use the target word, and was careful to paraphrase it in case she misspelt it. One related word was ‘current’. There was also one verb usage in the excerpt: ‘the ones that exist’.

The 32 uses of the word ‘lenient’ offer insight into how students tried to cope with the task. Lenient was used for three different syntactic functions. Related uses and right uses were 17 and 12, respectively. Related uses reveal that participants comprehended the concept signified by the word. Some of the related uses included: ‘loose’, ‘relaxed’, ‘ignore mistakes’, ‘do not give equal punishments’, ‘should be strict’, and ‘intolerant’. This is an indication that this word was accurately linked or connected to other words in the same semantic field. Three misuses included two spelling errors (‘leniancy’ and ‘lenienncy’) and one syntactic function. (‘Lenient’ is used as an adverb.)

Overall, the word ‘superiors’ was referred to 6 times, with 4 related uses and 2 right uses. Related uses included ‘leaders’, ‘managers’, and ‘law-makers’, which reveals that near-synonymous words were linked.

Finally, the word ‘inspection’ was used as a noun and verb on 10 occasions. One related use was ‘supervision’.

Discussion

Based on the results and analyses, it can be asserted that using code-mixing to selectively utilize L1 words in teaching L2 vocabulary items does not negatively affect the acquisition of new vocabulary except for minor spelling problems. This practice has neither decreased fluency nor inhibited production. Although no overt instruction was given to students to use the new vocabulary, their performance in writing indicates that they can establish links with other related words in their existing vocabulary, and fit the newly learnt vocabulary into the relevant lexical field. The way participants paraphrased, explained, and used related words is an indication that the connections between and among words have been established, meeting criteria in McClelland et al.’s (1986) connectionist model for successful encoding learning of new vocabulary in input.

As noted earlier, an interesting phenomenon is that students never attempted to use L1 words in speaking or in writing, as the teacher had done in the storytelling portion of the lesson. This was possibly because they were aware of the learning process, and they noticed the rule—both
necessary procedures for conscious learning to take place as Schmidt (1990) claims.

The toleration of code-mixing by students is an approach supported by Littlewood (1984), who describes it as one of the survival tools in communicative strategies. Further, he predicts that ‘... this strategy is most likely to succeed in situations where the listener has the knowledge of the speaker’s native language’ (pp. 85–6). Littlewood argues that this is only natural if the learner will have to avoid communication because of a missing word in his L2 repertoire.

Although code-mixed items may well indicate learners’ interlanguage at the lexical level, it is shown here that code-mixed items in the teacher’s speech were not evident in the students’ output. This can be attributed to the consciousness or awareness of students that these items were targeted for learning, and that the teacher’s intention was to teach them, rather than to engage in play with them. Perhaps learners also inferred this from the fact that the L2 words were new to them, and the challenge and expectation in a classroom environment was for them to learn and use the target items.

Another important implication of this study is that when a vocabulary item was presented to students through code-mixing, they were able to rely on their existing morphosyntactic knowledge to use the new vocabulary for other syntactic functions. This, of course, is related to the proficiency level of the participants—intermediate and upper-intermediate. That is, they had the requisite knowledge and level to be able to apply the L2 morphosyntactic rules. In addition, the students never felt that they had to use the vocabulary items solely in the syntactic function with which they were presented. There were times the learners produced a target form to perform an inappropriate syntactic function. This situation can be viewed as a promising development, in that it helps the learning process become more like that of children acquiring their L1. That is, in the L1 acquisition process, some difficult words are replaced by their nearest synonym in the same language.

**Benefits**

One of the primary benefits of this technique involves time. Both preparation and implementation of this technique require minimal amounts of time. In preparation, the teacher targets a maximum of five novel lexical items to introduce. If s/he does not share the students’ L1, additional research and checking is required for the L1/L2 correspondence. Implementation requires presentation of the lexis in context—for example, telling a story, reporting a news item, or other forms of context and modes (e.g. worksheets, realia, etc.).

An additional benefit is that code-mixing does not require additional materials. A simple story is sufficient context in which to present the target lexis. The students, regardless of level, seemed to find this sufficient input with which to produce novel sentences, including the target lexis with relative confidence.

**Constraints**

The main constraint of using code-mixing to teach vocabulary, of course, is that learners must share the same L1. The basis of the approach lies in
moving from the familiar (L1 lexis) to the novel (its L2 equivalent, the target lexis). However, this does not preclude using the approach in second language settings (e.g. a large language institute), where the learners may be of mixed L1 backgrounds. It simply means that in the classroom, the learners must share the same L1. One might assume that the teacher has to have the same L1 as the students, but this is not the case. As long as the teacher investigates the accuracy and appropriateness of the L1 equivalent, there is no restriction on the teacher’s L1.

**Drawbacks**

A potential drawback involves learners’ production of the target lexis. Spelling may be inaccurate, especially when the lexis has been presented or introduced through oral/aural modes. For instance, ‘leniancy’, ‘exciting’, and ‘lexity’ were misspelt by the participants in the study. This is likely due to the absence of visual support of the input (i.e. seeing the lexis in its correctly spelt form). Additionally, students may produce syntactic forms, in oral or written form, that are not appropriate or accurate. Examples from the study include ‘lexiance’, ‘lexical’, and ‘existant’. Strategies to address these issues include delaying writing tasks after input so that learners will have opportunities for input of the lexis in written form. Further remedial spelling sessions could be included in follow-on lessons where necessary.

**Principles and practical issues**

The underlying principle of the use of code-mixing in vocabulary teaching is needs-driven. There has to be a perceived need on the part of the teacher. That is, the teacher should be able to anticipate vocabulary which is unknown or relatively unfamiliar to learners. It is also context-driven: the context or story itself determines the target lexis, alongside the students’ lexical needs.

After the lexical needs and the context are established, the teacher begins the story, and inserts the L1 lexis. In the next utterance, the L2 item should be used in the same syntactic function as its L1 equivalent, to indicate that the L2 and L1 items correspond. Later on, the L2 item can be used in different syntactic functions to show learners the other usages in the word family. Additional highlighting can be done through the use of anaphoric referencing, such as they, this, it, etc.

Another option to delineate the concept designated by the L1 item is to explain it using near-synonyms or related words, with paraphrasing introduced by expressions such as that is, and I mean. Further, the teacher should reduce the tempo when pronouncing the target lexis to indicate that it is the word that corresponds to the L1 lexis. Finally, in the conclusion or summary section of the input, the L2 item should be repeated in order to reinforce the earlier input.

**Conclusion**

In classrooms where L2 learners share the same L1, new vocabulary may be introduced through code-mixing. Storytelling is an activity with which the teacher may raise a topic using a certain number of unknown words. These words are first introduced in the context of a story, told in the L2, using their L1 equivalents. The teacher continues the story, and immediately following this utterance, s/he replaces the L1 item with the
L2 target lexis. Use of various syntactic forms of the new vocabulary in further utterances contributes to more effective internalization of the lexical items. This study has shown that careful and judicious use of code-mixing can lead to appropriate successful teaching and learning of new vocabulary in speaking classes.

Final revised version received September 2002

References
Channell, J. 1988. ‘Psycholinguistic considerations in the study of L2 vocabulary acquisition’ in R. Carter and M. McCarthy (eds.).

The author
Dr. Mehmet Celik holds a PhD in Linguistics from La Trobe University, Australia. He is currently working as a lecturer and teacher trainer at Hacettepe University in Turkey. His interests include the teaching of vocabulary through code-mixing, the teaching of pronunciation, stress and intonation, short stories, and testing.
Email: mcelik63@hotmail.com

Appendix A
Selected extracts from writing task

Lax:
One of them is lexity of the rules.
... first is the lexical rules ...
... are not strict enough.
... are very loose.

Authorities:
... the authorities don’t give enough power ...
... authorities doesn’t take care ...
... authorities don’t pay attention ...

Existing:
... the existing traffic rules are insufficient ...
Existing laws can be useful ...

Mehmet Celik
The existing laws are very lenient.
... the exciting rules ...
The current traffic rules ...

**Lenient:**
Police officers are lenient.
The leniency is another problem.
... they behave very lenient in practising the rules.
... the traffic officers’ lenient attitudes.
... for leniency of laws ...

**Inspection:**
... there isn’t enough inspection on the roads.
A good inspection is also important.
... can be seen in the inspection of deriver’s licence courses.
... authority should supervise ...

**Superiors:**
... do not inform their leaders ...
... do not talk to their superiors ...
... contact with their managers ...

### Appendix B
Target lexis tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Misuses</th>
<th>L1 uses</th>
<th>Related uses</th>
<th>Right uses</th>
<th>Combined uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lax</td>
<td>Noun</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>authorities</td>
<td>Noun</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>existing</td>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lenient</td>
<td>Noun</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adverb</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inspection</td>
<td>Noun</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>superiors</td>
<td>Noun</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Teaching vocabulary through code-mixing* 369